 Ind Apr 24-30 '96

Methodists poised to decide church's stance on homosexuality

The Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church on Tuesday issued a statement supporting 998 General Conference delegates trying to hash out "serious differences" regarding homosexuality.

"These differences are also reflected within the Council of Bishops," the statement said. "We have been praying together and have been talking with one another in a new spirit of honesty and openness that is both painful and hopeful."

The Denver gathering was rocked last week by a statement from 15 of the church's 130 bishops — including former Colorado Springs First United Methodist Church Pastor Calvin McConnell — voicing "pain" over "proscriptions … against gay and lesbian persons." Current doctrine forbids ordination of self-avowed practicing gays, declares homosexuality "incompatible with Christian teaching" and denies church money to gay groups.

Delegates — who have been logging 14-hour days since the conference opened April 16 — must decide whether to modify the church's position on several thorny issues before adjourning Friday.

"You've got a pretty zonked-out group of delegates," conceded Gerald Trigg, pastor of First United Methodist Church and one of three Colorado Springs delegates to the quadrennial conference.

But Trigg, a reserve delegate, nonetheless praised the gathering's cooperative spirit. "The great reality of this conference is expressed in three phrases John Wesley used frequently: 'In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity.' "

Wesley would not have considered social issues such as homosexuality "essentials" that require agreement, Trigg said. "Therefore, we debate and discuss and we end up, in some measure, seeking to accommodate strongly held positions on each side."

Petitions to modify the church's stance on abortion also are before the conference. Current doctrine notes "the sanctity of unborn human life" while supporting a woman's right to choose abortion after "thoughtful and prayerful consideration."

During the conference's first week, delegates:

- defined the role of baptism in the church
- endorsed major programs to strengthen the church's work with blacks, Native Americans, Asian-Americans and Hispanics
- adopted a new Spanish-language hymnal
- apologized for the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre of 200 Cheyennes in an attack led by Methodist lay preacher John Chivington

First Lady and longtime United Methodist Hillary Rodham Clinton addresses the gathering today. Delegates voted against inviting Elizabeth Dole, who last summer left Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington to become a Presbyterian. She'll receive instead "a letter of good wishes and appreciation" for her work with the Red Cross.

— Cate Terwilliger

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